DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 026 408 TE 500 262

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Minding Our Own Business.

Association of Departments of English, New York, N.Y.
Pub Date Jan 69
Note-4p.
Journal Cit-ADE Bulletin; n20 p23-26 Jan 1969
EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.30
Descriptors-Culturally Disadvantaged, Educational Attitudes, *Educational Objectives, *English Instruction, English Programs, *Higher Education, Program Evaluation, *Race Relations, *Social Values, Teacher Responsibility

Higher education's direct responsibility for certain aspects of the contemporary civil and social disorders is discussed, and the university is viewed as an institution of American society which perpetuates class and race discrimination. Recommendations are made for feasible reform of the "elitest" educational structure through greater awareness and responsibility in the teaching of language and literature. (CW)

ED 029262

ADE BULLETIN, Number 20, January 1969

MINDING OUR OWN BUSINESS

By Daniel Bernd, United States Office of Education

Members of the English profession would do well to ponder Mark Twain's remark that "To be good is noble; but to show others how to be good is nobler and no trouble," before they pass resolutions on such assorted subjects as the draft and the moral climate of Chicago. While an increased social awareness can hardly be faulted, we must be careful not to trade one kind of irrelevance for another, moving on the political scale from right to left without examing our own responsibilities for the problems that beset us, and thereby delaying their solutions.

To put it bluntly, I believe that those of us in higher education are directly responsible for the ghetto, for urban disorder, for police rioting, and for the deterioration in confidence between the young and their government. And rather than indulging in spasms of moral righteousness about the iniquities of the military-industrial complex we might well consider the educational power structure and our own place in it--not the sins of politicians, scientists, space engineers, policemen, and legislators, but our own.

My premises are simple ones:

1. The shape and structure of American life is governed primarily by education, our largest industry.
2. The control of American education rests in the hands of colleges and universities, mainly exercised by liberal arts professors.
3. The nature of the American society is therefore the resultant of forces inherent in the values and structures of higher education.
4. Higher education has organized itself as racist, elitist, selfish, and irresponsible.

The fact of institutional racism in higher education has become obvious enough recently. There could be no ivory tower dweller left who doesn't understand why children from Watts and Harlem have little chance to get into college and why they can't pass our tests. Yet members of the academic community have difficulty in understanding the connection between their own elitist values and the racism of the institution within which they operate. Their own humane liberalism is quite irrelevant in the face of an educational world which institutionally discriminates. Our definitions of quality cause more discrimination and waste more human resources every day than all the overt racists could manage in a lifetime of effort. Given the opportunities to teach in, give money to, do research with, or vote power for, we will exercise the options in favor of places that rank high in the production of what are conceived to be quality Ph.D's, no matter what the need is for other services. And those schools, of course, are the ones that devote minimal resources to teacher education, and which know the least about and accept the least responsibility for the communities in which they exist. Entrance into and power within those colleges and universities are preserved by a system of tests and measurements, grade-point averages, and self-regarding criteria of quality which, intentionally or not, discriminate against those who are not trained in institutions attuned to those criteria and staffed by their graduates.

Because we work those selection and control devices first and foremost in the service of what we conceive to be our own economic and professional interests, we have failed the people we have intended to serve. We are caught in a curious trap: our responsibility is to transmit and transform culture and knowledge, the traditions of civilization, but in organizing ourselves to preserve the independence and freedom necessary to meet that responsibility we have erected a system that prevents us from doing it.

I have been led to this conclusion by some disturbing phenomena, primarily the political polarization along educational class lines that has appeared in the last year--phenomena

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

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which demonstrate that the problem is somewhat more difficult than simply compensating for the neglect of the minority disadvantaged. We have had a Presidential Campaign in which one candidate forged a coalition between college students, professors, and the upper middle-class, and on at least one occasion publicly called attention to the fact that the educated people voted for him and the ignorant for that other fellow. Another candidate constructed a campaign carefully aimed at the prejudices of the lower middle-class. I submit that when one candidate is the hero of college professors and another of policemen, then something is wrong somewhere. The suspicion of intellectuals and the educated by people who work with their hands may rest on some solid evidence that the intellectual community has not and does not serve their interests. I would, to a large extent, agree. If policemen act as less than humane, don't the humanists bear some responsibility for that?

While it is easy enough for us to see that schools fail ghetto children, we are mistaken if we think we can fix it up by civil rights laws, open-housing, increasing by a few percentage points the number of unqualified minority students admitted to college, or adopting a mystique of community participation--however important those remedies may be. We must examine the reasons why we have failed the rioting cop as well as the rioting black, find what it is in <u>us</u> that has produced a class education system, and then do something about it.

There is plenty of evidence of our failures in the schools, particularly by humanists. Literature and the arts are cultural matters considered mainly the property of the college bound. Why vocational education should be considered more appropriate for the poor, blue-collar class children, and juvenile delinquents, and literature more appropriate for white-collar class children and the rich is not very clear, but that is the curricular fact in most schools. Advanced placement, enrichment, and tracking programs do, empirically, in most schools, sort out children along class and income lines. (It took the Federal courts to persuade the Washington, D.C. school system of that truth.)

And when it comes time to go to college, (those that get even that far are the educationally privileged) the tickets of admission must be purchased by performance in school and on tests which reflect the values of the college professors to a very marked degree. What is taught and tested in school depends enormously on what college professors think ought to be taught and, I am convinced, what they think their own children should learn. We are familiar enough with the accounts by Milovan Djilas and others of how Communist elites tend to perpetuate their own, new class by manipulating educational opportunities for their children, but we haven't examined that phenomenon very closely in our own country. It does deserve examination. I think we would find the tests will always result in the admission of professors' children and the children of the communities in which they live. My observations of the tendency of college teachers to judge schools in very personal terms have led me to the formulation of the first law of educational testing: "Whenever the children of college professors begin to score lower than the first quartile on standardized tests, the tests will change until they do score in the first quartile."

What we define as quality education is a self-fulfilling prophecy that separates children along income and class lines. That the system does so discriminate has been so well documented that it is not even arguable. What is not so well understood is that the way we educate students in higher education, particularly in teacher-education, supports and perpetuates that class system, and it should not surprise us that the system does not suddenly become egalitarian and democratic beyond the twelfth grade.

That class education perpetuates itself is demonstrable not only by what happens to the children in the schools but by what happens to their teachers in college. It is not simply that the richest school systems hire the best teachers, it is that what <u>we</u> think of as the best teachers are the ones the richest schools hire. And this is true not only from district to district, but even within the <u>same</u> district. There is, in the American

schools, a rather close correlation between the grade point average of the teacher and the income level of the school he teaches in. The higher the grades, the richer the community he serves. Not to beg the question of the rationality of that criterion (indeed, I insist that it does beg the question), it is clear that the elementary and secondary schools perpetuate the rewards system and the values of the colleges and universities. Those teachers who do best in the colleges teach in schools most concerned with imitating them and acting as their transmission belt.

Upper class schools reflect their masters in another interesting way; that is, in the inverse ratio between contact with students and status. The more students you deal with, the lower your prestige and pay. The pinnacle is reached, of course, by the research professor who has no students at all to speak to.

Now, most humanists and other liberal arts professors would deplore the results of this system without understanding that their own status structure is the major means of supporting it. The trouble with the American liberal arts professor is that he does not realize how much power he has. He is as profoundly dissatisfied with the schools as I, but he thinks it the fault of the educationists, principals and superintendents, school board members, or State Education Departments rather than himself. He does not realize that he has won his victory over the teachers colleges. He not only outvotes them in faculty meetings, he is becoming increasingly successful in imposing his research orientation upon them. Both among the pedagogues and the non-pedagogues, power adheres to those who know the least about the schools for which they, presumably, are preparing their students to teach.

The main weapons for maintaining control by these elites is, of course, the graduate degree. By controlling the entry level to the profession, and by emphasizing degree status more than educational function, those in power retain their power. Thus we have the pyramid of American education: the younger the student and the lower the grade level, the less the prestige, power, and reward. It would seem obvious that the very best educational resources we could muster (again begging the question of "best") would be directed at elementary and secondary school children, but the reverse is the lamentable case.

The education professions are no different from any other profession in putting first priority on organizing themselves to protect their own interests. As Bernard Shaw commented in The Doctor's Dilemma, "All professions are conspiracies against the laity." But the laity tolerates these necessary professional conspiracies only as long as they are persuaded of a pay-off in performance. The schools receive the brunt of public dissatisfaction much more quickly than higher education because we have, in the first place, managed to shift the blame for failures in the schools somewhere else, and because, in the second place, the research-dominated graduate-school-controlled system has paid off handsomely in its enrichment of American life. We are now beginning to see, however, that we are doing only about half as well as we ought.

Well then, what should we be doing? I have some specific recommendations for reform, recommendations which are well within our power to effect--now, with present resources. I think we must make them because I believe what I have been taught--that the teaching of language and literature is a supremely important human activity, central to the survival of the American democracy.

1. College teachers must get out and see what is going on in the schools, as part of their professional responsibility. If you have teachers of English in your classes, you must know what is going on in their classes. You can not leave that task to somebody else. Subject-matter knowledge is a necessary condition of teacher prepartion but it not a sufficient one, for any of us.
2. We must move out, formally or informally, to establish a professional relationship with all of the schools--ghetto or suburb, poor or rich. The teachers and the students need us and we need them. Part of our responsibility is professional association with elementary and secondary school

teachers. Unless we can regard them as colleagues, jointly responsible for the preservation and growth of our subject disciplines, then we will never understand nor help them, and if we can't help them, we can't help ourselves from disappearing into dry scholasticism.

3. We must insist on rewarding work in teaching, and working with teachers (is there a more important research problem than "How is this subject learned?) equally with conventional scholarship. So far we have been separatist and far from equal in how we treat our colleagues in the subject matter itself who interest themselves in the teacher-learner problem, at any level. Even those departments who do allow English Ph.D.'s to do this work do so on a very limited scale. Such a professor is usually there to demonstrate a public departmental broad-mindedness about the problem in order to cover a private determination to ignore it. It goes without saying that he will be promoted more slowly and paid less than the "pure" researchers. And even those who succeed within our research-oriented graduate schools in interesting themselves in teacher education usually succeed at the price of being good Uncle Toms (I probably fall into that category myself). As long as they admit that the scholars treat them well, don't have any truck with educationists, don't talk back to the promotion committee, and indicate that they know their place, they can work directly with teachers. Although the Liberal Arts Dean as plantation owner is not too far-fetched an analogy, perhaps a Marxist model of the graduate professor as the entrepreneur absorbing the surplus value of the labor of the lower-class teachers is still more apt.

   I have a simple enough formula to cure this absurd distortion, a formula that wouldn't cost any money: at least half of every English department should be members with a direct and major responsibility for teacher education, and they must be rewarded for it. Their research must be directed at finding out and demonstrating how and what children learn, and how they can help those children. Perhaps if we direct our attention at our primary consumers we can avoid the sterile, simplistic disputes about publishing or perishing, or research versus teaching.

4. We must further forego the stale and evasive arguments about the difficulty of evaluating teaching performance, our own or anybody else's. Even if we don't know how to evaluate teachers and teachers of teachers, we had better find out. If we don't like somebody else's performance criteria, we had better develop our own. The fact of the matter is, there is a considerable body of literature on evaluation which humanists remain ignorant of at their own peril. A good deal of that literature is helpful, and much less threatening to individualism and humane values that the obscurantism and cowardice that refuses to consider or learn what we already know. The only antidote to behavioristic over-reliance on irrelevant and trivial tests is to know their weaknesses and to know the reasonable alternatives.
5. Certainly teacher education is too important a matter to be left to educationists. Teachers of basic subjects must be taught by subject-matter specialists who are interested in them as teachers. Teacher-training programs, whether funded by the federal government or from other sources, must have the support and interest of those specialists. The liberal arts departments must seek funding for their own interests or somebody else will do the job. The response of the Office of Education or the Congress to the demands of subject-matter disciplines depends ultimately on the willingness of those disciplines to participate, and to participate in the full understanding of their continuing responsibility.

The foregoing rests upon the assumption that the American nation is egalitarian or it is nothing, and that education is either democratic or not worth supporting. My plea is for the recognition of our own duties toward the children and their teachers. We cannot afford the luxury of blaming the Chicago police, the war in Vietnam, or the draft laws. The faults lie within ourselves.

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